

Scenery: “My Way”

Presented by Rob Spangler
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Say what?

- ◎ These are ideas and techniques that work for me.
 - They give me predictable results.
 - They may or may not work for you.
 - They can be used for any locale.
 - Try 'em. You might like 'em.

Addressing Western Scenery

- Many a western-themed layout features:
 - Vertical rock faces everywhere!
 - Unrealistic and/or too little vegetation.
- In other words, such layouts utilize stereotypical “model railroad” landscapes instead of scenery inspired by the real world.

My part of the West

- My Western Pacific 8th Subdivision is set in the Great Basin Desert of northwestern UT.



The Prototype

- Former WP main, Low Hill, UT.



The Prototype

- Hansels Mountains, UT.



Evaluating the prototype

○ Think about:

- Form
- Color
- Texture
- Vegetation
 - Types
 - Sizes
 - Density
 - Variations between locales

Evaluating the prototype

◎ Also think about:

- Space allocation:
 - How much of your scene can be represented in 3-D?
 - How much information will the backdrop have to supply?
 - Consider more open space instead of track or structures. Even a small amount of “nothing” between towns can make the scene, and layout, look bigger.
 - Plan in 1:1 and mock up whenever practical. Try to determine how the scene will fit before you start building.

Starting Construction

- With the roadbed and track in, my usual first step in building scenery is the fascia.
- I typically use 3/16" hardboard (Masonite or equivalent, the tempered material from Home Depot that's smooth on one side).
- I finish it just like the backdrop to completely eliminate visible seams or fasteners.

Fascia

- Fascia is a cross-section through the landscape. Wherever the aisleway cuts through the scene, that's where the contour goes.



Call for Backup

- Reinforce the fascia to minimize movement, and subsequent damage to the scenery.



Prepare the Scenery/Backdrop Interface

- Determine where the 3-D/2-D transition will be.



I do this at the same time I'm planning the fascia.

Assemble the Supporting Structure

- I prefer to use a web of cardboard strips assembled with hot glue.
- Don't weave the strips. Weaving isn't necessary for strength, and can create an unrealistic, lumpy surface.
- Use clothespins for clamps while the hot glue cools.
- Remember to leave space for future plaster (or other surface material) thickness.

Starting the Web



Strips start off oversized

Build the Cuts



Remove cardboard from the top of the cut once the sides are supported.

Substrate for Plaster

- I mostly use two types of material for holding up the plaster:
 - For smaller areas - fiberglass mesh drywall tape (the thinnest, finest mesh from Fibatape works well).
 - For larger expanses – cheesecloth or tulle (bridal veil mesh). Tulle has a more even “weave” and no threads to unravel.
- The above are secured with hot glue.
 - Otherwise they can move around on you and make a mess.

Add the Substrate



Tulle

Fiberglass Tape

Plaster

- ⦿ There is nothing magical about Hydrocal.
- ⦿ Most setting-type plasters will work with my methods.
- ⦿ I typically use USG 20-minute casting plaster (it's available locally).
- ⦿ The initial coat over the mesh material is mixed about 1.5 plaster to 1 water and applied with a brush.
- ⦿ Later brush coats can be 1:1 once there's something to support them.

First Plaster Brush Coat



But Don't Stop There!

- The initial plaster shell only serves as a structure for holding up the finished product.
- Don't just accept whatever shape the base shell has at this point – build on it to create something that looks finished.
- Fill between the cardboard ribs – the shell shouldn't resemble an anorexic supermodel.

Filling In



The fill coat is 2:1
plaster : water

Planning for Rocks

- Rock formations get many a modeler into trouble.
- Even the most rugged scene isn't just rock outcrops everywhere.
- Use photos showing the larger scene, not just what's directly around the tracks. Model rocks in context.
- Avoid situations where "convenient" rocky slopes exist just to support the track, or to provide a spot for a structure. Even where track is built on a rocky slope, the roadbed itself usually incorporates fill material.
- Remember that excavations don't look like naturally occurring cliffs.

Methods for Modeling Rocks

- ◉ No one method works for everybody. Experiment and find the one that's best for you.
- ◉ I prefer hand-carving.
 - I can easily control the size and shape of model rocks.
 - Hand-carved rocks can fit anywhere.

How I Do It



I add stiff plaster and carve away everything that doesn't look like a rock.

How I Do It

- I mix rock batches with roughly one part water, one and a half to two parts plaster, plus a fistful of sand.
- Sand retards setting somewhat, and adds texture.
- I finish all carving before the plaster sets, so I finish rock work with each batch before moving to the next.
- Carving is done with a combination of an artist's palette knife, a one inch putty knife, and/or a chisel.
- I finish around rocks by smoothing the surface with regular plaster batches, just like the ones used for smoothing the base shell (i.e. no sand). Smoothing may not be necessary for areas to be buried in talus.

Paint Prep

- Vacuum any remaining plaster chunks.
- Clean up rough edges along the fascia. Sand the edges smooth and/or fill any gaps so the fascia will have a clean appearance when it receives final paint.
- Fill the scenery/backdrop joint with paintable caulk to make a seamless transition between the two, and to prevent future cracking along the joint. (This works best if you're painting the backdrop – photo backdrops may require different treatment.)

Coloring Rocks

- Coloring rocks is more involved than other areas, but not by much.
- The process I use goes fast.
- There are multiple ways to do it. Again, experiment to find which one you like.
- Colors often will lighten over several days. Err on the dark side, and don't judge the result until you're familiar with how the colors change.
- Don't apply any color to plaster until it's dry to the touch. Plaster that is cool and damp to the touch will not absorb color properly.

Coloring Rocks – Step 1



I apply a DARK wash from diluted black acrylic craft paint. I don't have a set formula. Apply the wash to all rocks in the work area and allow it to fully dry.

Coloring Rocks – Step 2



Dry-brush two or three progressively lighter shades of acrylic craft paint to create depth. Use rapid brush strokes

Don't fully cover the black. Leave it visible in spots for shading.

Craft paints frequently come in lighter and darker versions of the same basic color, but the colors used don't have to be that similar to each other.

It's Fun!

My 11-year old daughter helped painting rocks. Here she is working on a cut.



Color – The Final Step



Everything that isn't a rock is easy – I use plain tan flat latex house paint. The same paint can be used to start underpainting backdrops.

Starting Backdrops

- I prefer to start backdrop work after 3-D scenery is painted, but before ground cover is applied. If you wait until after dirt and grass start to go in, you'll fight loose particles that get into the backdrop paint.
- Again, the sequence may have to be adjusted if you use photo backdrops.

So Teach Me How to Paint One!

- Painting backdrop scenery is not a model-railroad-specific skill.
- Understand your abilities and plan your backdrop accordingly.
- Color and shape are more important than detail. A backdrop consisting only of simple shapes painted in solid colors can still be effective, provided the colors and shapes make sense. Practice those first.

Backdrop Resources

- ◉ Mike Dannemann, "Painting Backdrops for Your Model Railroad," available from Kalmbach.
- ◉ Margaret Kessler, "Painting Better Landscapes" and "Color Harmony in Your Paintings." These books are geared to working in oils, but have ideas that are universal.
- ◉ Bob Ross? I don't care for this style when applied to backdrops, but he still had some useful ideas for beginners.
- ◉ Photos: Base everything on a photo. Don't invent landscapes or rely on memory.

Backdrop Hints



Note how caulk provides a seamless transition.

Paint the sky and clouds first.

Block in some basic shapes with a limited color palette. The underpainting here uses the tan latex from the plaster shell, plus some ultramarine blue and white acrylic.

More Backdrop Hints



Use simple color formulas.

Paint the finished backdrop only after you're satisfied with the underpainting.

Avoid pre-mixed greens. They are usually too bright and bluish to work with foreground scenery materials. Learn to mix muted greens from black, blue and yellow (and red!). Keep 3-D scenery materials around for reference.

Ground Cover

- Except for rockwork (rock faces and cuts) I like to cover all of the ground with sand and/or dirt before applying vegetation.
- The base layer of sand allows a realistic texture to show through thinner areas of grass and other vegetation.
- I usually apply two layers of sand to ensure complete coverage.
- Let the sand dry before proceeding.
- The sand allows later glue applications to stay wet longer, increasing working time for grass.

Step by Step

1) Painted
plaster.

2) Base
sand
layers.

3) Ground
foam and
static grass.

4) Weeds
and shrubs

Glue for steps 2 and 3 is diluted and brushed on. I use full-strength glue for step 4.



Adhesive for Ground Cover

- I use white glue diluted about 50/50 with water.
- I don't use matte medium because:
 - It isn't readily soluble in water after it dries.
 - The talc that makes it "matte" can be difficult to eliminate and leaves unsightly residue.
 - It seems to be more likely to fill spaces between rocks, ballast grains, and so on, so these materials don't appear to be as "loose" when dry.
 - I notice no change in layout noise vs. using diluted white glue.
 - It is typically much more expensive than white glue.

Talus and Fills

I use lots of rock material to build up talus slopes and fills. Color isn't critical – dry brush with your acrylic rock colors after the talus is glued down.

I usually add talus before grass.



Adding Grass



I apply a brush coat of diluted glue over the base sand layer.

I then add a thin layer of fine ground foam, immediately followed by static grass while the glue is still wet.

The foam fills up space and reduces the amount of static grass I need.

Sample Grass Recipes

- These work for late summer for many parts of the interior West.
- Foam: Mostly Woodland Scenics fine “Yellow Grass” or Scenic Express “Yellow Clay,” plus some Woodland Scenics “Earth Blend.”
- Static: Silflor “Golden Grass” 6mm, Noch “Beige” 4mm, Woodland Scenics “Harvest Gold” and “Wild Honey” (both 2mm).

While You're At It...

- As long as you have the static grass out, make some weeds and grass tufts.
- Apply spots of flexible glue like Aleene's Tacky Glue "Easy Flow Formula" or Canopy Glue to some non-stick aluminum foil and apply static grass.
- You can create tufts by the hundreds for CHEAP.
- Hat tip to Jimmy Simmons' Monster Model Works "Jimmy's Tips & Techniques" page http://monstermodelworks.com/download_files/StaticGrassTips.pdf .

Shrubs 'n' Stuff

Junipers – poly fiber with various brands of conifer green fine foam attached with 3M Super 77 or hairspray. Some have twigs for trunks.

Sagebrush – 3M Synthetic Steel Wool chunks, with AMSI “Eucalyptus” or Accurail “Sagebrush” coarse foam attached with 3M Super 77 spray adhesive.

Coarse foam can be used by itself for small sagebrush plants



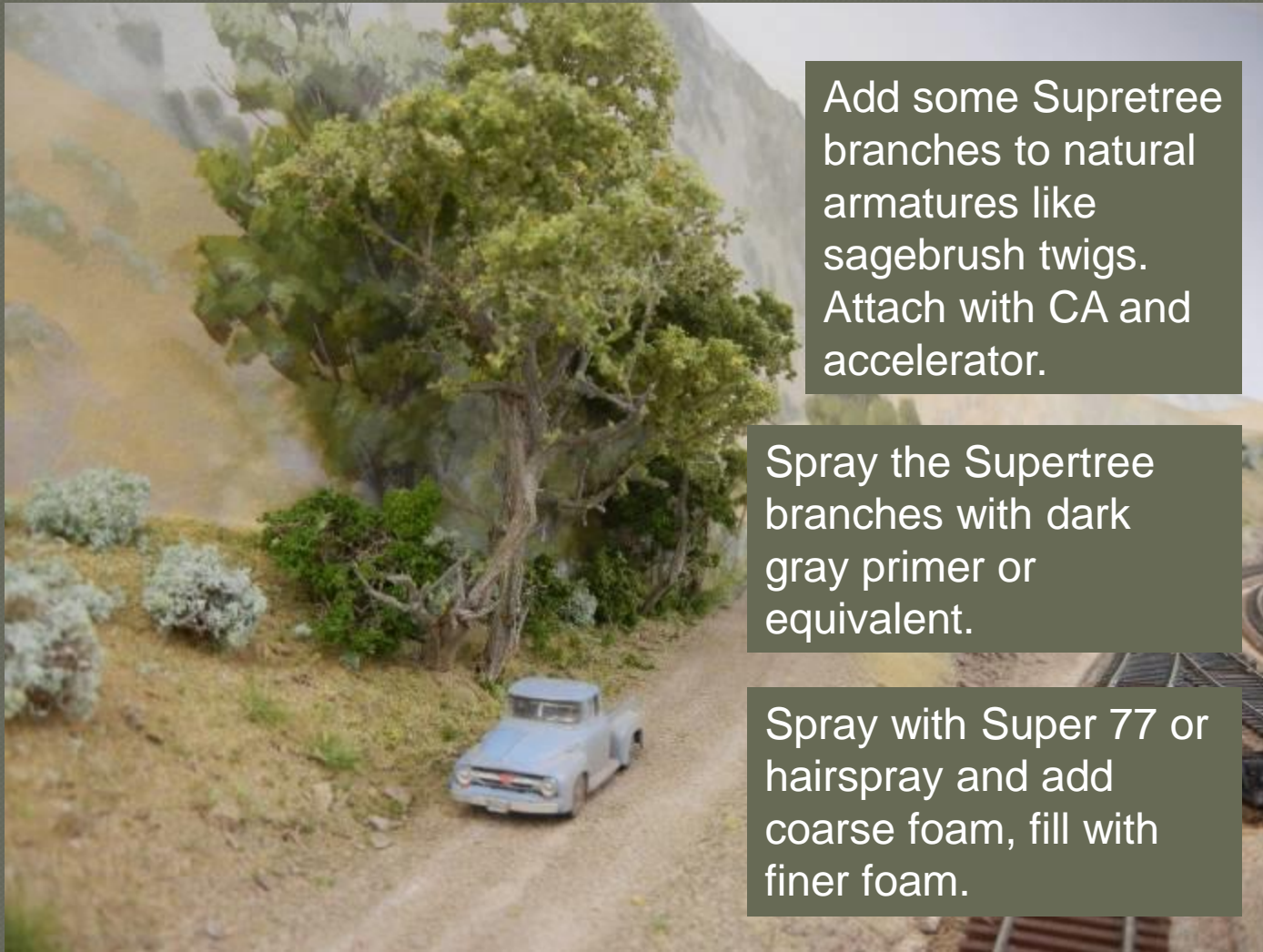
More Shrubs



I use Supertree material for some of the bigger shrubs. Again Super 77 is the adhesive for ground foam, or extra-hold hairspray.

Synthetic steel wool is great for larger bushes too. It has a nice "branch" structure.

Broadleaf Trees

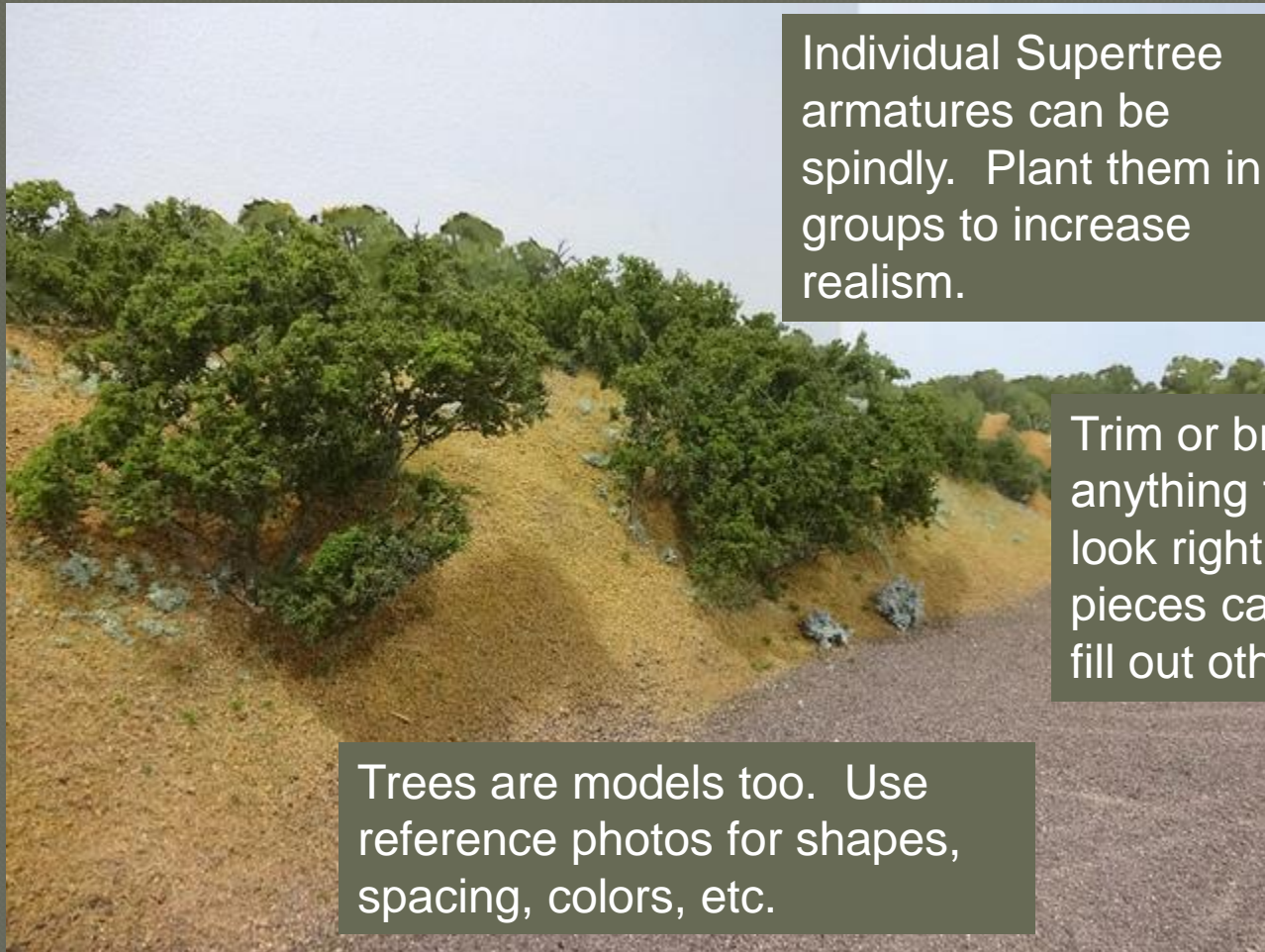


Add some Supretree branches to natural armatures like sagebrush twigs. Attach with CA and accelerator.

Spray the Supertree branches with dark gray primer or equivalent.

Spray with Super 77 or hairspray and add coarse foam, fill with finer foam.

Broadleaf Trees



Individual Supertree armatures can be spindly. Plant them in groups to increase realism.

Trim or break off anything that doesn't look right. The extra pieces can be used to fill out other trees.

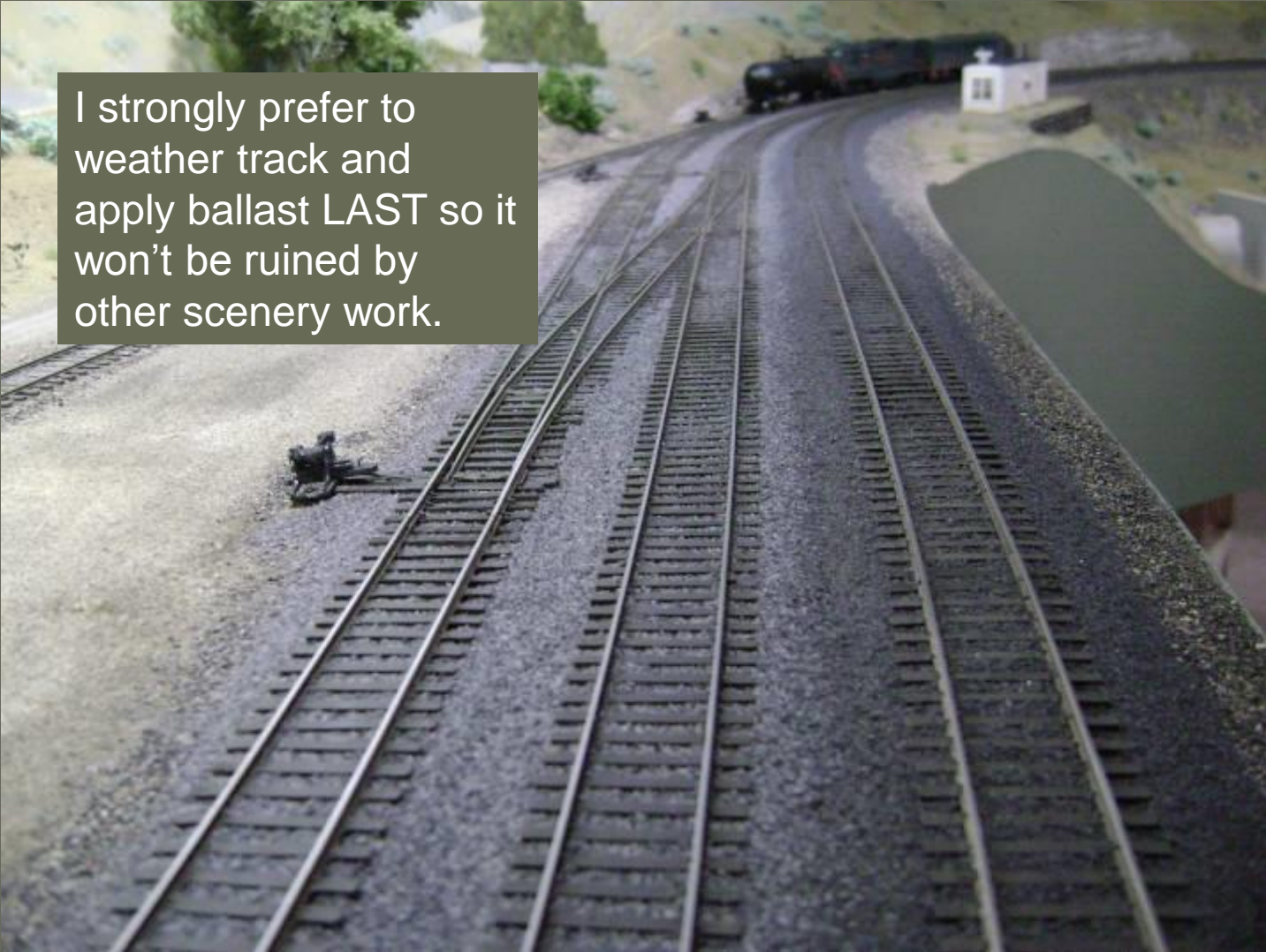
Trees are models too. Use reference photos for shapes, spacing, colors, etc.

Ground Foam for Trees

- Use a selection of similar colors from several different brands.
- Coarser grades look good for most leaves in HO.
- Try the “open cell” “Super Turf” coarse foams from Scenic Express. I like “Spring Green.”
- Woodland Scenics fine “Green Blend” is a good filler.

Finishing Track

I strongly prefer to weather track and apply ballast LAST so it won't be ruined by other scenery work.



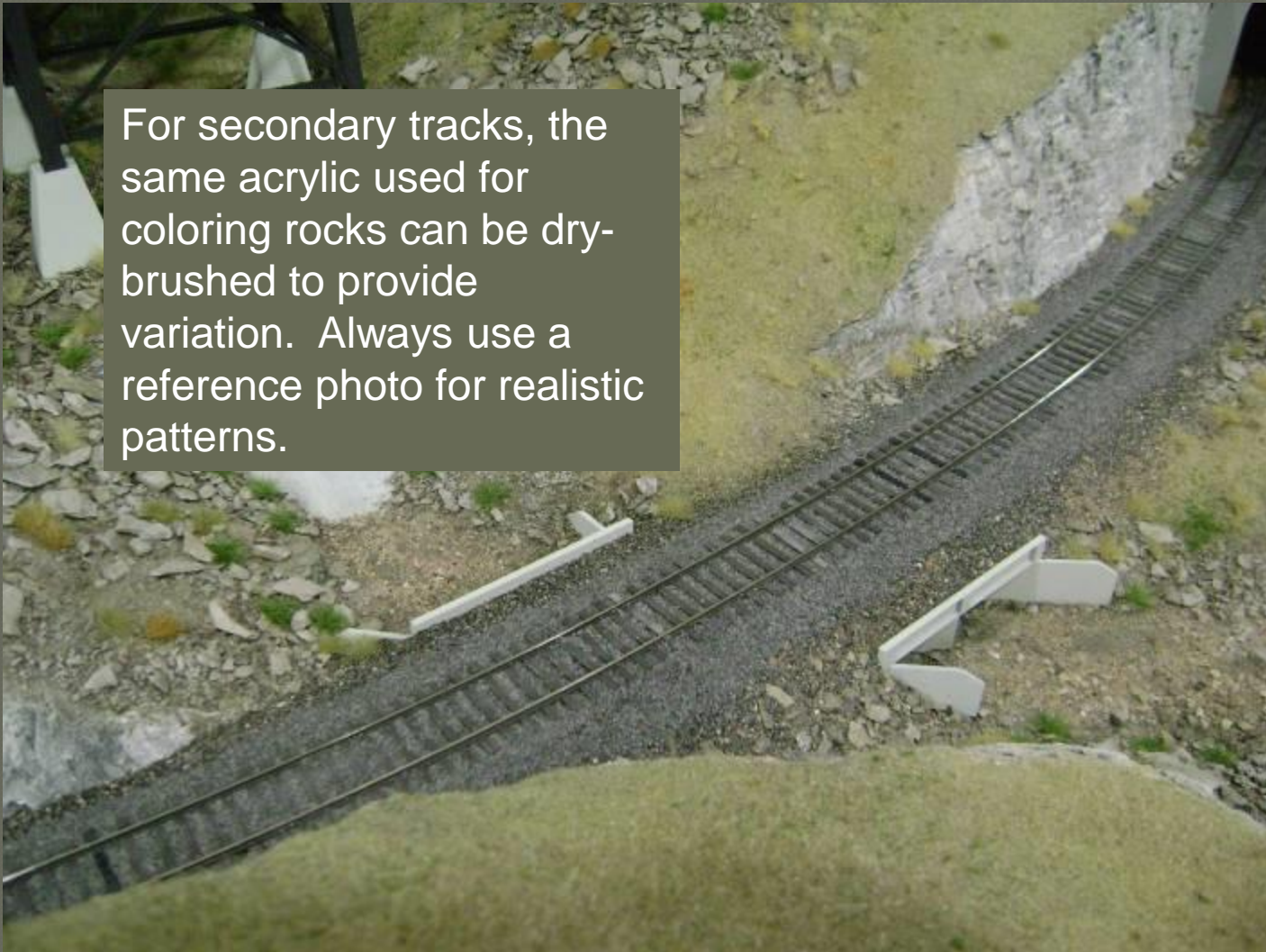
Painting Track

For most mainline track I spray Rustoleum dark brown camouflage,” brush Americana acrylic “Charcoal,” or use a similar gray-brown color. I usually avoid too much variation.

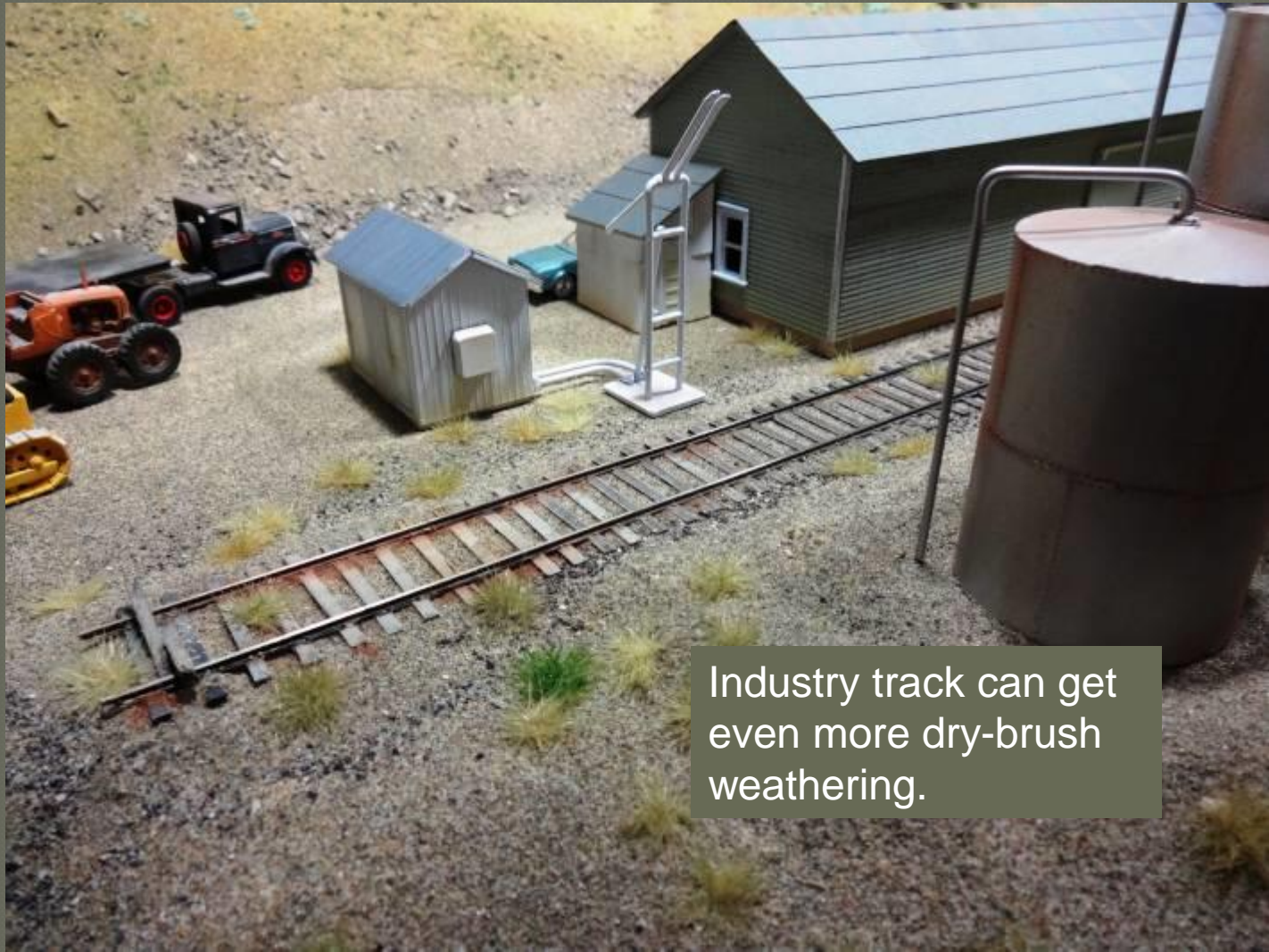


...And More Track...

For secondary tracks, the same acrylic used for coloring rocks can be dry-brushed to provide variation. Always use a reference photo for realistic patterns.



...And Still More Track



Industry track can get even more dry-brush weathering.

Ballast Thoughts

- Use ballast made from real rock. I like Scenic Express, Arizona Rock & Mineral, Smith & Sons and Highball brands.
- Sand works well for industry and yard tracks.
- I wet with water with some isopropyl alcohol added, wait maybe 15 minutes, then glue with 50:50 diluted white glue.
- I don't like Woodland Scenics ballast. Compared to real rock, I find it harder to apply, soak and glue.

Roads



This asphalt is sanded tile grout weathered with dry-brushing and chalk.

Grout is very hard and it's the same color all the way through (i.e. it's durable).

More Roads



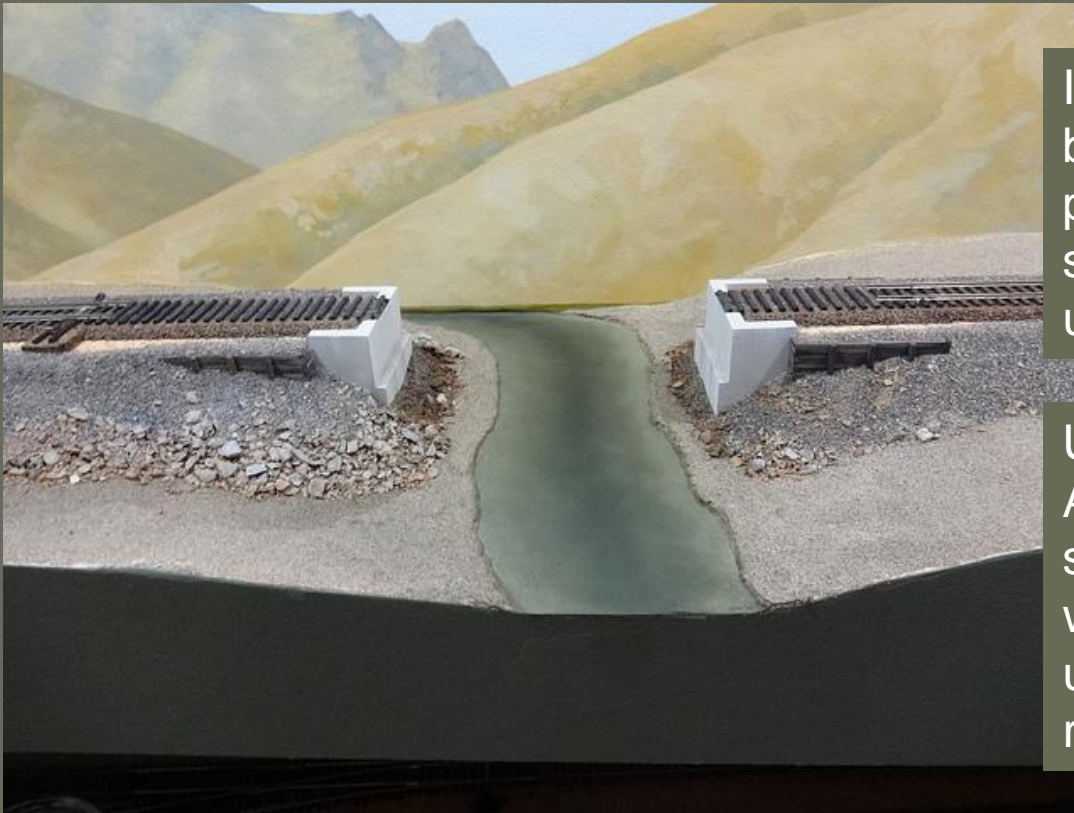
This gravel road is sand with dry-brushed acrylic.

Water

- I tend to use one of two methods, painted plaster or tinted epoxy resin, coated with gloss Mod Podge for ripples.

Water

◉ Painted Plaster



I painted this creek bed with acrylic craft paints. Start with a smooth surface. I used drywall mud.

Use photos for ideas. Avoid sharp color separations. Keep reworking and blending until the results look right.

Water

◉ Mod Podge Gloss



Apply a ripple pattern using a soft brush and a jabbing motion.

Water

◉ Finished Creek



Water

◎ Epoxy Resin

- All brands work the same: Envirotex, Crystal Sheen, Amazing Clear Cast, etc.
- To guard against failure to set, use just over 50% Part B (hardener). Exact 50:50 batches often stay sticky no matter how precisely you follow instructions.
- If a batch fails to set, apply a brush coat or another pour over it, mixed with extra hardener.
- Epoxy set perfectly smooth. It still needs Mod Podge ripples.

Water

◉ Prepare the Water Course



Finish the stream bed with sand, rocks, fallen trees, etc.

The dark color was airbrushed to impart depth.

Build dams as needed with acrylic gel or caulk to keep the resin from flowing downstream.

Water

○ Pour Resin



Note the dam made from a Homasote scrap, tape, and a clamp. Resin will escape if given a chance.

Keep pours to around 1/8" deep.

This is two pours of resin tinted with Testors olive drab enamel.

Water

◉ Add Rapids – Finish the Edges



I added white water with acrylic craft paint.

Resin creeps into the banks. Use Dullcote and/or other scenery paint to cover any resin that wicks into the wrong place.

Water

◉ Finish with Mod Podge



The right side of the bridge has a coat of Mod Podge, the left is just resin. Smooth resin doesn't look like moving water.

That's About It...

- ◎ For more ideas visit my blog at *Model Railroad Hobbyist* at <http://model-railroad-hobbyist.com/blog/rob-spangler> .